

# **JOURNALIST'S "COVID-ARENA":** FIGHT FOR HEALTH AND PROMPT INFORMATION



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Other financial challenges for the media were and still are problem, primarily due to reduced media revenues, which pose threat of layoffs and wage cuts. In the face of a health crisis, which began to affect people's mental health, this was additional problem. In such arena for accuracy and timeliness, in addition to the public interest, journalists and media workers had to box for conditions to protect their own health, dignified salaries and psychological peace.

The COVID 19 crisis, according to research by the Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers (SSNM), further worsened the already fragile socio-economic position of journalists and contributed even more to the mental health of media workers. According to the latest survey by SSNM, the crisis affected 62 percent of journalists, and 17 percent had their salaries reduced by 2020.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred in every country in the world between February and March 2020, many people spent less time socializing and much more time staying at home on their digital de-

vices. This phenomenon additionally gave space, but also increased the interest of the citizens to follow information, primarily related to COVID-19, but also to other social, political, and economic topics as consequence of the pandemic. In conditions of global crises, journalists and the media have huge role to play in informing citizens on how to protect public health.

This role of journalists and media was recognized in Macedonia as well. It is assumed that the traditional media returned some of their viewers, with their professional approach to the pandemic news, and some of the online media showed virtue and courage in the fight against false narratives, but also in investigative journalism. Although, only few, the investigative stories managed to capture part of the entire scene in which Macedonia lives, and in it there were indications of "military" profiteering, strange decisions, unprincipled agreements, violations of protocols. All this was under the scrutiny of journalists, while some of them, once again showed that they do not lack the courage to research even in pandemic circumstances.

# I. PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES FOR JOURNALISTS DURING PANDEMIC

*During the corona pandemic, the journalists for the first time in the history were faced with new professional challenges i.e., faced completely new way of working and reporting and, on the other hand, it is risk to their health. From February onwards, they were regularly exposed to danger in order to be able accurately and promptly to inform the public and present the field image, but as time went on, some institutions forgot the word transparency and accountability.*

**Written by Irena Mulachka**

On February 26, 2020, the first case of patient infected with the dangerous corona virus appeared in Macedonia, brought for the first time in the country by woman who was visiting her relatives in Italy. She was expressly hospitalized at the Skopje Infectious Diseases Clinic and as of that moment, the daily battle with the deadly virus has already started, which has so far infected more than 100.000 citizens, and over 3.000 patients have died.

For the first time in history, the country found itself in such hopeless situation, when all the accumulated problems in the health system, which had accumulated over the years, as well as the lack of medical staff, which is crucial in the fight against the dangerous virus, came to the surface. Macedonia found itself in state of emergency, for the first time under curfew with closed borders and catering facilities. The number of sick and dead started to increase daily, the health authorities initially informed about the alarming events twice a day, while the citizens regularly watched in front of the television screens and waited for the new daily reports of the Ministry of Health.

However, throughout the corona crisis, journalists were not spared, the ones who normally had to do their duty and report on developments in the country, whether it was from the Government premises or any of the ministries. Initially, journalists were able to attend press conferences with protective equipment, but later decision was made to join online, which gradually began to reflect on the transparency of most of the competent institutions.

For the first time in the history of the country, the journalists were faced with new professional challenges, i.e., to

face a completely new manner of working and reporting, and on the other hand to expose their health to a risk. From February onwards, they were regularly exposed to danger in order to be able accurately and promptly to inform the public and present the image from the field, but because, as time went on, some of the institutions, some intentionally, and some perhaps unintentionally, forgot of the word transparency and accountability. Another problem in the whole story is that some of the public relations officers sometimes claimed that their employees were “victims” of the corona virus. Therefore, they could not manage to work with such small number of people, and there were cases that many of them have children under the age of ten and they had to sit at home and take care of them, which was another Government recommendation during the pandemic.

From the experience so far, it is fact that everyone who comes to power is more in favour of covering up the problems faced by the state, than to say them publicly, in order to prove that transparency and public interest are above all.

The current Government has taken several steps to improve communication with media workers, at least in terms of transparency, unlike in the past, when ordinary information was treated as state secret. Although there is improved communication, however, it is truly clear that some Government officials, especially in the lower echelons, are making efforts to put things under the rug.

Let us see what has been learned from the whole situation as a lesson from the terrible COVID pandemic.

# 1.1. INSTEAD OF WITHIN 30 DAYS, I RECEIVED ANSWERS AFTER SEVEN MONTHS

After the first registered positive cases of COVID 19, at the end of February and after the introduced measures for limited movement in the first half of March, number of public institutions were reorganized to work with reduced capacity to keep safe distance of employees from each other at the workplace. The citizens, as well as the media workers, felt that on their backs, who had to fulfil their duty i.e., inform the public promptly about all the developments related to the virus that is shaking the entire world.

Many of them, through their experiences, explained to us what problems they faced until they came to certain information, how many closed doors they met and how long it took them to confirm the data they came across. Everyone we spoke to unanimously claims that most of the officials and institutions abused the pandemic to hide the information.

**Maja Jovanovska** is journalist from the Investigative Reporting Lab IRL and she shared her experience in performing work duties during the COVID pandemic. According to her, the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced the transparency of institutions and restricted access to information.

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*“Institutions constantly use the pandemic as excuse that they cannot submit the information on time or that they will not submit it at all. Institutions also often abuse the Law on Free Access to Public Information. That is, they wait for the last day to submit the requested information, which is often partial, or the request is rejected. Well, a long procedure begins through other institutions to obtain information that is important to the citizens, but the institutions try in every possible manner not to submit it to the public,”* said Jovanovska.

Through several of her examples, she explains what she faced with in order to provide prompt and accurate information to the public. Jovanovska even states that the data she requested through free access to information, for which the legal deadline is 30 days; she received answers even after seven months, which violated all legal deadlines.

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*“An example of non-transparent institutions is MALMED (Drug Agency), where in August the IRL submitted request under the Law on Free Access to Public Information, but we still do not have any answer. We used all legal possibilities for response i.e., we complained several times to the Agency for free access, but we did not receive any response from MALMED.”*

*The answers arrived in January this year, after seven months, which violated all legal deadlines, but obviously the heads of institutions are not worried, but on the contrary they are comfortable, because penalties for them are either not imposed or are exceedingly small” - adds Jovanovska.*

The IRL journalist also has remarks about the press conferences held in the Government and emphasizes that this manner of posing questions online allows the officials skilfully to avoid the answers.

*“They seem to be held every day and in quantity, they are exceptionally large, but with much reduced transparency. For the citizens to understand what is hidden behind these, I would call them, ministers and officials*

*addressing, I would explain what that practically means. Namely, the Government initiates the press conferences and daily events, and thus the Government is positioning itself in the role of “daily editor”, as it seems that is the place where is organized the media working day. That is, press conferences always have certain topic, for example on a success, project, the Government, or institutions’ action and very rarely journalists can ask off-topic questions. That is, this online manner of communication facilitates their position, because the journalist can ask additional question to which the required answer can be skilfully avoided. On the other hand, I have remarks for the journalists, because this so-called lazy journalism is welcoming clicks and a ton of useless news, which most of them have no information of public interest” - Jovanovska specified.*

## 1.2. THERE SHOULD ALWAYS BE SPACE FOR CRITICISM

The Minister of Health, **Venko Filipche**, at the beginning of the pandemic was one of the ministers who appeared on television screens two to three times a day to calm the situation, to explain that there are enough health facilities for all patients with COVID, and that the country has sufficient medical staff. His pace and work

dynamics caused admiration among most of the public, who turned the minister into a star, who “skilfully” deals with the terrible enemy.

Nevertheless, within few months, the situation began to change. Thus, from the regular daily press conferences,

as the figures increased, reaching 1.500 infected per day, the Minister appeared less often, the regular daily press conferences were not held, they were held occasionally, and there was information about the numbers of newly infected and deceased.

On a positive note, staff advisers were quick to respond to reporters' questions, although not always in full. Speed and expediency mostly referred to questions related to daily information, and for other questions related to tenders, companies moreover, money, there were slower answers, which is somewhat understandable, but only if it is in the function of gathering information that requires more time. Another problem was that part of the scientific and doctoral profession was not sufficiently present in the public.

**Mirjana Mirchevska Jovanovich** has been journalist in the health sector for several years and she managed to capture all the problems she faced until she reached to the information from the Macedonian authorities. According to her, the pandemic brought the most of challenges for journalists.

*“As a health journalist, COVID 19 is major topic on a daily basis. A great challenge that will leave mark in my profession. Experience from this pandemic has shown how it works in times of crisis. For us, the most important thing is the function of the institutions as they influence the manner of reporting. I can say that part of the medic's fellowship responded well with promptly statements and explanations. What was missing was*

*larger initiative from academics, such as professors. The statements from the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts are missing, as well as the professors from the Faculty of Pharmacy. Communication is very important for proper reporting, especially in the period of immunization to have accurate and prompt information” - explains Jovanovich from Kanal 5.*

She even made a comparison with the manner of informing in the neighbouring countries, where she claims that they have greater desire to inform their citizens about the developments in their countries.

*“Unfortunately, professors from Serbia with greater desire and enthusiasm feel the need to explain the importance of immunization,” the journalist added.*

According to the current practice, from what we can see, only few people turn to the media and they explain about the consumption of medications, the danger of COVID 19, immunization, for the way of protection from the dangerous virus. Not all other doctors and experts in certain fields want to talk about the topic. This is not the first time in our country that journalists face such situations. It was similar during the measles epidemic, when no one from the Infectious Diseases Clinic in Skopje, which should be the main stronghold for infectious diseases, wanted to make statements.

## 1.3. EMPLOYEES ARE IN ISOLATION, THE ANSWERS WILL BE LATE

Almost all journalists, regardless of the sector in which they work, faced the sad reality in the country, namely the non-cooperation of some of the state institutions, with the corona crisis making their situation even easier. Such example is the courts, which due to the nature of their work, meant increased frequency of employees, prosecutors, lawyers, parties, especially because the courts are the places where citizens exercise their rights, regardless of whether they are party, accused or damaged.

There was initial idea to organize online trials, when the numbers of newly infected became alarming, but Macedonian courts are not technically ready to implement such an approach. Well, that is why everything remained the same, but that does not mean that those journalists, who for years have been following the trials, days and nights in front of the Macedonian courts, did not face their transparency, especially during the corona crisis.

*“The pandemic has contributed to slowing transparency of some state institutions. It happened that I got the answers to the questions with delay with the explanation that the employee who has them, or can provide the required data, is in isolation due to COVID 19. Often the pandemic was excuse for not doing*

*something. I received explanation that the delay in fulfilling the obligation is due to the pandemic” - claims **Elena Ivanovska Mukoska** from Telma TV*

She adds that, as journalist who most often covers the topics related to judiciary, would point out that the Judicial Council did not provide conditions for journalists to be able to follow their sessions, which are public.

*“Once the pandemic started, we could not attend because there was not enough space in the conference room to comply with health protocols. The Judicial Council, according to the principle of the Anti-Corruption Commission, should provide conditions for online monitoring of their sessions, given that this judicial body will be in the focus of the public in the next period as well. A constant problem with many judicial institutions, courts and prosecutors, before and during the pandemic, is that they give scanty, inaccurate answers, or use clichés that the procedure is secret or that they cannot give more information” - explains Mukoska.*

Most journalists who cover the judiciary claim that only in the Criminal Court, in some way even during the pandemic trials can be followed, by following government recommendations. At all other courts, this is not possi-

ble because the premises are small and there is no place for the parties to gather, namely the defendants and the lawyers, and not mention the journalists.

According to Mukoska, the answers they often receive give the impression that there are attempts to hide from the public what has been done or to get additional time

*“In such situations, we as journalists have to use our sources and contacts for the data we should receive through the official channels and press services. The Supreme Court does not take on the role of being leader in transparency and setting standards for lower courts in openness to the media, and through them to the public” - explains the Telma journalist.*

On the other hand, each of the courts faces its own internal problems during the corona pandemic, so the President of the Basic Civil Court, **Ilir Sulejmani**, says that he has been sitting on that chair since 2015 and wants to be most transparent, but still the conditions they did not allow it.

*“We are the most transparent court of all, but the pandemic played very big role in the whole story. Now, the most important thing is to follow the recommendations, the premises are small and there is no place for those who judge and the ones that are accused. What will happen if all journalists enter? If only five can be gathered, then that is how many can enter the room. We cannot let in 15. A cluster will happen to us and the whole court will have to be closed,” Sulejmani said.*

He admits that they receive complaints about the postponement of the trials but adds that they have no choice.

*“It can happen that there are 8 plaintiffs in one trial, and 13 on the other side, and where to gather them all. All this will have consequences in every feasible way. However, everything is aimed at respecting the protocols. We used to have collegiums, and now, if we want to hold a collegium, we will have to go to the stadium. In time of pandemic, we cannot be as transparent as we want, and most trials are even postponed within a reasonable time” - adds the President of the Civil Court.*

## 1.4. ASSEMBLY NOTICE DURING A PANDEMIC TIME – “NO, THANK YOU”

There were also problems during the pandemic in the Assembly where, despite the daily quarrels between the government and the opposition, in the last few months the spears were broken whether to hold the sessions online or not, given that there were several cases of infected MPs with COVID 19. Some of them did not attend the parliamentary sessions at all, but still had to appear for voting. This, in turn, was made difficult by the fact that they are in self-isolation, in order not to transmit the virus to other MPs.

As it seems, the parliamentary majority was in favour of online trials, while the opposition, more precisely the VM-RO-DPMNE parliamentary group, vehemently protested this, claiming that Article 69 did not allow it, as it is written that the majority of the MPs should attend the sessions of the parliament.

In the end, they did not find common language, but because of that, the journalists who have been following the parliamentary events for years faced new professional challenges, claiming that in time of pandemic it is not worth working from the Assembly premises, given the “secured” conditions.

*“Reporting from the Parliament in a time of pandemic? – No, thank you! - This is the answer of all journalists who will be given such task, knowing what they will face there. In the entire process, the simplest thing is to enter the Parliament as accredited journalist. Then, all the corridors lead in one direction - to the press centre. Eventually to the crystal hall, if MP schedules press in this hall as set facility for the contacts of the journalists with the MPs. In any case, communication is one-sided - we are there when THEY sit down or when THEY have something to tell us. Even then, you cannot leave the press conference hall” – explained **Sonja Nikolovska** from Telma who has been working as parliamentary rapporteur for 25 years about her experience through the parliamentary corridors.*

She explains what a journalist day looks like in the corridors of the parliament during corona virus period.

*“In those two halls, we have three monitors at our disposal, on which we try to follow the speakers, while a colleague has live call, another ‘chases’ topic, a third negotiates statements, and other journalists and camera*

*operators try to keep their distance. It is even worse with the commissions. There is Internet Explorer transmission only from the 'Boris Trajkovski' hall. For other committee reviews of the laws, you must wait to see if MPs are interested in telling you something. Before that, you need to get them on the phone because random contact is impossible. Well, since I can do all that from my office, I rarely go to the Assembly during this period. Moreover, when I go, I come across one or two journalists who are there because they have link links or maybe they have meeting" - adds Nikolovska.*

The other journalists who have been following this sector for years think in equivalent way, so that most of them do not go to the Assembly at all during this period, since they cannot find way to get the necessary information.

We tried to reach the parliamentary speaker **Talat Xhaferi**, but he did not answer our questions.

## 1.5. DUE TO UNPROFESSIONAL ATTITUDE, THERE WAS PANIC AMONG THE CITIZENS

Outside the capital, things are even more "scary". There were positive examples in which many of the mayors officially announced that they were positive on COVID 19, but some of them and the institutions under their leadership hid it as it is state secret. Everything depending on which city it is and how much the local gov-

ernment is willing to communicate in open and transparent manner with the media. Many of them have always claimed that they have no authority to take measures to prevent the pandemic but can only warn the citizens to respect the existing measures adopted by the government.

*“Our hands are tied. All that I can do is to go out and publicly inform the public what is happening in the city I lead, how many active cases there are, how many deaths there are and normally to appeal to them to respect the measures. It is well known who decides about everything else” - says a mayor from the eastern part of the country, who wished to remain anonymous.*

Some of the citizens accuse the mayors that despite the alarming numbers of infected and dead, they pursued their policy, i.e., asphaltting roads, where more workers gather. According to them, evidence that local authorities can help citizens is noted by the campaigns at the beginning of the pandemic, when actions were organized, and food was brought to the citizens who were in self-isolation. In addition, children’s playgrounds were closed in several cities, i.e., places where more children gathered to play, and thus to control the spread of the pandemic.

The mayor of Veles, **Ace Kocevski**, on the other hand, boasted that the municipality he leads is one of the most transparent municipalities in the country.

*“For years, the Municipality of Veles is one of the most transparent institutions and public institutions in general. We have the largest number of digital services and we work in accordance with the ISO standard for quality in the work of the public administration. Even during this period, while dealing with COVID 19, we had excellent cooperation and jointly coordinated action, not only with local institutions (PCE, Derven and TPPE),*

*but also with health institutions at the central level, the civil society, and the media. Particular emphasis is given to the excellent cooperation with the PHI General Hospital, the Centre for Public Health, the Health Centre, as well as with the Association of Family Physicians and the Red Cross. The work of the Municipal Headquarters for Protection and Rescue was contributed by the representatives of the Army, the Ministry of Interior and the competent institutions” - says Kocevski.*

Some local journalists, who are constantly monitoring the corona crisis in their cities, say that mutual cooperation and transparency, but also unprofessionalism and actions to the detriment of the public interest is part of the attitude of the competent institutions towards the media that during the corona virus pandemic showed up on the surface.

*“As a media worker at ‘Fokus’ that transmits daily events, but also as resident of Tikvesh area who reports on all notable events in that region, since the appearance of the first case with COVID 19 in the country, on February 26, 2020, I knew what will follow. I was on my way when the Minister of Health Venko Filipche announced that the virus was registered in the country and I followed the conference by phone. The phone at once started ringing. The fear of the unknown virus was great, the public was looking for answers, various speculations from the very beginning started to create panic - Is it true that the positive patient is from Kavadarci, weather the passengers in the van with her were from Negotino?” - says the journalist Viki Klincharova.*

She added that the first thing she did was to contact the minister, who told her where the patient was from, and details were asked for each new case, especially when the infected were people who had specific jobs and were in contact with more people. Klincharova claims that she had very correct cooperation with the Centre for Public Health in Kavadarci and with the epidemiologist Riste Jovanoski, the Centre for Public Health in Gevgelija and with the director of the hospital in Kavadarci.

*“It is of great importance, given that in Kavadarci we had the youngest death of patient positive for COVID in the country and transparency was key in building public confidence in the health system. However, there is no lack of unprofessional moments in the institution-media relationship at the height of the world pandemic. Due to the insufficient professionalism of the responsible persons, there was unnecessary panic among the population” - says Klincharova.*

As negative example, she singled out the former director of CPH Veles, Dr. Ivanova, who very rarely answered the

phone calls, and even when she answered, she raised unnecessary panic, which disturbed and irritated the public.

*“In the first months after the outbreak of the virus, when positive patient was registered, a person employed in foreign factory, people in the region feared that the virus appeared in the factory where more than 6.000 people from Kavadarci, Negotino, Veles, Prilep work ... Anxious citizens were looking for answers, and the statement of the then director was that the infected person does not work at the factory we are interested in, but at another factory, and she refuses to tell us exactly where he is employed. These are the situations that cause revolt among the people, but they were additionally fuelled by the thesis that something is deliberately hidden, kept silent, that there are backstage games in the whole situation with the pandemic. A new director has now been appointed at her place” - says Klincharova.*

## 1.6. GOVERNMENT AND TRANSPARENCY DURING A PANDEMIC

On several occasions so far, the government has appealed to all institutions to be transparent, in order to inform the citizens in prompt manner about all developments related to COVID 19. However, on the other hand, they also found easier way to organize press conferences in the Government, and the ministers answered the questions. To some extent, this worked satisfactorily. However, if ministers refused to answer a question, they skilfully avoided it. This was provided by the new manner of functioning i.e., the online communication, which was introduced as practice due to the coronavirus, so that sometimes journalists did not get answers to all the questions.

**Marjan Zabrcanec**, who oversees the Government public relations, says that since the beginning of the pandemic, the government was diligent in order to provide prompt and accurate information to the public, in order to protect public health. He explains that they wanted the media to be the first to receive information from the institutions in order to prevent fake news.

*“The epidemiological crisis is limiting factor that required fast adjustment of the measures, and thus the certainty that the new information will reach all citizens. The strategic commitment for the institutions to be the*

*first to come out with information, as one of the manners to prevent false news and misinformation. For that purpose, was set up a team with the task to coordinate the information between the crisis headquarters, the ministries, and the media, providing daily, accurate and fast information. The protocol for press conferences and events with live media was prepared” - says Zabrcanec.*

According to him, in order to achieve full transparency, press conferences, press releases and statements were practiced at the moment of decision-making related to the crisis, regardless of the weather conditions.

*“The practice was the same for all ministries in charge, including the Prime Minister. We processed the primary information in 6 languages, the rest of the communication was trilingual, Macedonian, Albanian and English and ensured inclusion of sign language. To avoid health risks, online communication tools, online press conferences and digital event tracking were introduced. For intensive and prompt communication with the citizens, information was regularly published through various channels - Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Viber, YouTube, and Android and IOS mobile applications were created. A special website [koronavirus.gov.mk](http://koronavirus.gov.mk) was created and in that context telephone lines were opened*

*for psychological support and information related to economic measures” - adds Zabrcanec.*

Journalist Maja Jovanovska from the Research Laboratory Network disagrees with him and explains with an example what she personally faced during the COVID-pandemic while researching on certain topics.

*“I will cite one of my personal examples when I asked the Government, i.e. the Nomination Commission for the minutes of the sessions at which officials were appointed, which were then confirmed at government session. The Nomination Commission, chaired by Deputy Prime Minister **Ljupcho Nikolovski**, did not submit the minutes and explained that the procedure for election of officials had not been completed. This is not true as from the first day when the mandate of this government began, there is almost no session at which dozens of directors, members of management and supervisory boards are not elected” - says Jovanovska.*

She is not the only one who has faced such problems while doing her job, i.e., prompt provision of information for the citizens. Many of journalists faced completely new professional challenges in their careers, which they have not had before.

According to the tradition, few of them we spoke to, wished to remain anonymous, claiming that they would have problems in the media where they work if they criticized the work of the government.

*“I can freely say that in relation to the government of VMRO-DPMNE, for which everything was state secret, this government is far more transparent, but, nevertheless, they also had many omissions. The fact is that some things are easier said than done, but the point is, the problem is not solved. Not to mention the directors, they are the least transparent in terms of their work” - claims a journalist, who wished to remain anonymous.*

## 1.7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BIGGER TRANSPARENCY

This one-year long pandemic has put to the test all stakeholders, both journalists and institutions, who have been forced around the clock to provide information and others, to make it public. There were also false news and misinformation that flooded some of the media, for their well-known reasons.

In Macedonia, things went so far that at the end of May, in front of the white government building, a protest was held against the 5G network, the coronavirus and the mandatory vaccination. At that protest were presented false information, baseless accusations, and misinformation in attempt to minimize the severity of the disease, which could have profound consequences for society as whole. In their statements, the organizers called the pandemic false, and as an “argument” for such a claim, they pointed out the accompanying diseases, i.e., the chronic diseases that those who died from the virus had.

Thus, everything considered, the COVID-pandemic showed the true face of both the institutions and the media workers, who, in attempt to do their job in professional manner, were often criticized for deliberately raising panic and intimidating citizens. Every government in the country, regardless to which party it belongs, should understand that the job of journalists is critically to observe their work, and not to praise and glorify them for

the projects they announce every day. Especially because everything stays only on the announcement, and it is rarely realized. Every journalist should inform the public in a prompt and transparent manner, given that the public interest is paramount. In this situation, especially with COVID 19, citizens are most important because they are most affected. It is true that we have no right to criticize the Ministry of Health that informed us every day about the number of newly infected and dead, in addition to the regular daily reports sent to the journalists’ e-mails.

On the other hand, critical observation on everyone’s work, including the health authorities, is necessary. It does not mean that if there is pandemic, everyone should agree with everything that the competent institutions would say, in order not to panic. No one can hide from the public if there is shortage of medical staff in public health facilities, especially when it became alarming during the pandemic, when most of the health workers, unable to withstand the pressure under which they work, went to private hospitals where they have better working conditions and higher wages.

If no one in our country realized that it is not the job of journalists to praise the government and its work, but to find the mistakes and state them loud in order to improve things, then we have serious problem. It happens

that many of the ministers are personally offended by journalistic article criticizing the work of the ministry they lead, and they stop any further communication with that journalist. Therefore, we can confidently say that everyone should take care for its own work, which means that directors, MPs and ministers should be transparent and accountable for their work towards journalists if we want to live, as they say, in a society equal for all.

Throughout this COVID-pandemic, the lives of media workers were endangered by the terrible virus, not to mention how many of them, and even entire newsrooms, were “victims” only because they were doing their job. Journalists, on the one hand, were exposed to danger because of their health, and on the other hand, in some

situations they had to fight with the non-transparency of certain officials, only because they do not like what is written.

From all the experience so far, we can conclude that no matter how much the government appeals for transparency and accountability, at the end everything depends on individual level of each of the officials. It is true that some of them regularly brief and give information, but some of them show lower level of tolerance, offended by the media because their work is criticized. We all agree that joint battle should be lead against the dangerous virus, but not at any cost. Everyone must do their job, both the officials and the media workers.

### **Elena Ivanovska-Mukoska:** The criminal court is open to access information

Elena Ivanovska-Mukoska, a journalist who follows the judiciary, says that in her experience, the Criminal Court is generally open to access information.

*“Given that the major court cases for which there is public interest are tried in this court, the daily challenge remains to organize the monitoring of trials according to the protocols. The large courtroom meets the requirements, in which the journalists are separated by glass*

*screen from the others present, and there are windows for ventilation, but some of the courtrooms do not have windows or are smaller. Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, in which Macedonia ranks worst in the last two decades, warns that the rule of law is weak link, and that greater transparency of institutions is necessary. This is another indicator that substantial changes and results are urgently needed, and not only declarative efforts” - says Mukoska.*

**Sonja Nikolovska:** It is very easy to report from the Parliament during pandemic, I do not even have to get up from my computer

The journalist Sonja Nikolovska from Telma claims that in the entire parliamentary Golgotha during the pandemic, the only bright spot is the briefings with the President of the Assembly, **Talat Xhaferi**.

“Once a month we can ask him direct questions. However, the question: how long it will be like this? - is unanswered. It is difficult to believe that:

- ▶ *I do not want to play the same inserts with all other media during every reporting on the parliamentary sessions,*
- ▶ *I do not want the quality of the recording to be VHS standard as it was at the time of my journalistic beginnings,*
- ▶ *I do not want all media to cover the same parliamentary topics, as only they are available for that day,*
- ▶ *I do not want the security to hinder my every step outside the Press Hall*
- ▶ *I do not want to wait for hours for the MPs to tell me what they are doing*

- ▶ *I do not want to receive insight from the sessions only from the Parliamentary channel broadcast*
- ▶ *I do not want to believe that two thousand euros a year is too much money for the Parliament to rent YouTube channel, as other important institutions in the country do*
- ▶ *I do not want to believe that the online sessions will continue to be science fiction until I retire, and the parliamentary majority will consider a success the Rules of Procedure, which will allow online voting of sick MPs.*

*The consequences are obvious: Parliament is interesting only because of the verbal clash between the government and the opposition. The content and harmonization of the draft laws is left to the government and the party headquarters, and the impression that the MPs are not working to earn their salary is fortified.*

*Therefore, when asked how the reporting from the Parliament during the pandemic goes on, I can say, Easily, I do not even have to get up from my computer in TV Telma” - adds Nikolovska.*

**Viki Klincharova:** Target to accusations that I was panicking, later they apologized to me

Viki Klincharova says that the pandemic has shown that media workers, wherever they are located in the country, have great importance and responsibility for accurate and prompt information to the public.

*“Personally, I have been repeatedly accused by people who believe in various conspiracy theories, I have heard stories that this is fictional virus and that journalists have been bribed to create panic. However, when, in the autumn, the*

number of infected people increased significantly and vacancies were sought in hospitals, some of those who blamed me the most often, told me that they were wrong, and they realized the mistake only after they or their rela-

tives became infected. I would also mention the cooperation with Minister Filipche, who always responds to a call or message and strives for the problems of the citizens to be solved” - adds Klincharova

### **Marjan Zabrcanec:** We do everything for citizens to be promptly informed

Zabrcanec claims that for easier access to information, special sections for COVID-19 have been created on the government website [vlada.mk/covid19](http://vlada.mk/covid19), where decisions from the sessions, decrees and all service information related to dealing with COVID-19 can be found.

*“Public events outside the media centre have been a challenge throughout past months. Health protocols are consistently followed to prevent risks, and protective equipment is provided as needed. A media pack-*

*age with photo, video and textual content is delivered as information from the events. Government sessions are held online. Among the general challenges in management are business trips abroad. For that purpose, GCAS through public procurement signed an agreement with a laboratory for PCR testing of employees at any time. The work process is organized in such a manner as to protect the employees, by working from home” - adds Zabrcanec.*

### **Judges with masks, parties online**

Only one month after the start of the corona pandemic in the country, for the first time in the Basic Court in Kavadarci, the hearings for four court cases were held with online trial, the court announced at that time. Representatives of the Basic Public Prosecutor’s Office in Kavadarci, the Inter-Municipal Centre for Social Affairs, as well as lawyers were present. As the Court informed at that time, the hearings were held through the electronic platform “Microsoft Times”.

*“Thus, the court and all other participants in the proceedings took and provided all measures for prevention by ensuring the social dimension during the state of emergency in order to ensure the smooth conduct of hearings and take action during court proceedings”, announced in April the Basic Court Kavadarci*

## **II. HOW THE PANDEMIC AFFECTED THE MEDIA WORLD “BEHIND THE CURTAIN”**

*The manner of receiving information has changed, the sources of information communicate differently with the journalists during pandemic. Any information during the pandemic had to be checked and filtered because of the danger of the poison of misinformation and semi-information in it. In such arena for accuracy and promptness, in addition to the public interest, journalists and media workers had to box for conditions for protecting their own health, dignified salaries and psychological peace.*

**Written by Miroslava Burns**

The COVID 19 pandemic threatened to change the journalistic profile but failed. Journalists have adapted on time to the inevitable, even during pandemic, information must be found and disseminated professionally, but in manner that personal contact with sources is reduced to telephone and video, office briefings will not be necessary and alternative methods of obtaining information will be sought. In this challenge, it was most difficult for television to adapt. The nature of their format requires video footage, statements from people, which are usually recorded in person and following events to inform the public. Professional associations have also been involved with their resources and guidance in the protection of the seventh force.

At the beginning of the pandemic, on March 18 the AJM and the Council for Media Ethics developed guidelines for safe and professional reporting on the corona virus. The second part of the publication deals with how journalists and media workers should protect themselves and their colleagues while performing their duties. Journalists, media workers, editors-in-chief, managers and those who organize meetings with journalists have obligation to adhere to the measures and recommendations given by state institutions. Such as the Ministry of Health, the Institute of Public Health, the Centres for Public Health, The Commission for Protection of the Population from Infectious Diseases, the Ministry of Interior, the President of the country and the professional associations which, in turn, prepare their recommendations in agreement with international organizations.

Among the standard precautions recommended by AJM and the Ethics Council to journalists and media workers were regular and thorough hand washing, keeping good respiratory hygiene, maintaining a distance of at least one meter, wearing personal protective equipment, cleaning and disinfection of the equipment they operate, such as cameras, microphones, cameras and desktops. The management of the media were instructed to release from work responsibilities and send them in self-isolation the journalists and media workers who have diagnosed one of the chronic diseases published at the list of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of North Macedonia or to negotiate with them if they want to work from home.

Older journalists and media workers, who have chronic health conditions, which are not part of the list of MOH in RNM, as well as pregnant journalists and media workers, who actively go to work according to their personal decision are part of the people who have high risk of exposure to the virus. Therefore, the employer had to assign responsibilities that they could perform at home, or exclusively editorial tasks.

Journalists reporting on the event were recommended requesting information from the event organizer if separate media section was provided in the facility (if closed) and the possibility for keeping distance of at least one meter between the media crews of each media, especially the camera operators.

*"When reporting from places with larger group of people to keep distance of at least three to five meters from the group, if there is need to approach for filming or photography. In addition, seek protection from using the same microphone to ask questions. If these protocols are not performed according to the standards, ask the organizers to provide them or to give you access to the online broadcast of the event (if they have organized), to be able to provide the statements. You can also ask the public relations and media person of the event organizer, if you can submit the questions electronically and have them asked exactly as written to the person of interest to the media, and then get transcript of the answers and the questions asked", it is stated in the guidelines of the professional associations.*

Trajche Ilievski, a camera operator from MTV, giving retrospective of the pandemic, which started in March 2020, says that at the beginning, the measures were respected. However, on several occasions, the camera operators had to react to non-compliance with the protocols of events organized by institutions

*"The distance at the notable events when more camera operators come to cover it, was not respected. We reacted through AJM and they corrected themselves. During elections for example, some political parties invited us to film in small rooms. We came to situation where a bad image was created as they thought we*

*were boycotting them, and we were just protecting our loved ones and ourselves. In September or October, when the Assembly began its work, the Assembly itself began to disregard the measures. They made statements in the press centre, in the hall, instead of downstairs at the open area. After our reaction, they started coming downstairs again. We should have reacted; the MPs themselves should have respect the measures that they themselves are obliged to respect. Then some institutions started giving us their inserts and videos to protect us. I am one of the twenty media workers who was infected with COVID 19 with moderate clinical picture, and we had to be in isolation. I am satisfied with how the employer reacted. There was no problem. We knew the primary infected person, we immediately did test, I called my supervisor and there was no problem. I was in isolation for twenty days and according to my information, other patients among the media workers did not have problem with the management. Masks and disinfectants are still provided to us by the editorial office, we as camera operators have disinfectants at every corner,"* says Ilievski.

This complaint was not the only one during the pandemic. On October 5 last year, the Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers appealed to the institutions to provide conditions for safe information during the corona virus and pandemic, as several members reacted to the manner an event was organized on the occasion of World Teachers' Day.

*"The event, which took place in the town square, was opened with the installation of school backpacks on chairs, which symbolically, represented recognition and gratitude for the teachers. Explaining that it was installation, media workers were not allowed to sit on those chairs. As a result, journalists and camera operators stood side by side, without any possibility for the required distance, according to health protocols to protect against the coronavirus. We emphasize that this is not the first such case. On the contrary, almost every day the ministries, but also some local governments organize press conferences or give statements, which, although at open, the measures for protection against the coronavirus are not, observed. Therefore, journalists and media workers are in inadequate conditions to perform their duties", said from the Union. They called on their colleagues, regardless of the presumed public interest, to leave the press conferences and similar events in the future, if they assess that the health protocols are not complied and if the organizer, although instructed, did not provide the necessary conditions for health protection.*

At the beginning of the pandemic, in March the government informed that given the state of emergency, the

press conferences would be conducted exclusively via an online stream, without the presence of journalists and camera operators at the government's media centre.

The questions for the press conferences during the day could be sent to portparol@vlada.gov.mk and to the e-mail address of the spokesperson / public relations person of the line Ministry, emphasizing the medium from which the question comes and indication for which press conference i.e., to which minister (representative of the institution) they refer.

The government also provided high-resolution video for download on its YouTube channel. AJM and the Council of Ethics, on the other hand, recommended that the journalistic teams or media managers to agree to send only one team for all media, when it comes to events of public interest related to the situation. Then the journalist from that team will submit to the authority all the questions from all media and will share the recorded materials. The recommendations for field reporting, on the other hand, referred to the fact that during the recording and live broadcast, the minimum distance between the attendees should be one meter. In hospitals, as high-risk sites for infection, journalists wore gloves and overshoe covers, and were advised not to leave equipment on the floor.

## 2.1. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDITORIAL WORK

The media were restructured, where possible the news crews rotated in groups, so that everyone in the newsroom would not get sick and would have to go into isolation. This was somewhat similar to the rotation systems practiced by hospital nurses. This recommendation was of particular importance for the public service broadcaster, which even in the most conservative scenarios should have available public reporting teams.

Employees who were able to perform work duties from home without any hindrance were encouraged by management to do so. It was recommended that working meetings and collegiums not be held or to be reduced or alternative ways of communication to be sought through video conferencing, telephone or in the open, where there would be one meter between people present.

Pamela Cilakov, a journalist correspondent from Veles for MRTV 1, says that, in addition to health workers, police and journalists were the first to be struck by the COVID 19 pandemic, which swept the world and became hot topic for almost a year of our everyday life.

*"In addition to correspondence for the national service, for me as young journalist, more precisely a politi-*

*cal analyst in the field of economics, to report on the topic of health was huge challenge. Both, doctors and scientists did not know exactly what it was. Moreover, we have huge burden to convey all this, consciously and responsibly before the public, to inform the citizens and, at the end, to calm them down, to remain conscientious and to appeal for the new way of life, although we carried a huge fear in us, but still we tried to hide it. My city, Veles, which I know as one of the busiest, during the curfew, only my camera operator and I were on the streets, touring the city, because we had live link call in the central daily for MRTV and that is the sight that I will never forget. My city was so empty and heartless. Depression, panic, fear, and great anxiety reigned among every person. As for the change of work, I would mostly focus on the attitude of the interlocutors, because, while fear and panic reign, people change, and that was reflected in their attitude towards us. At the beginning, I remember that none of the competent people we hoped to help and know more than the ordinary citizen on the topic of COVID 19, wanted to give live statements, but it all happened via the Internet, so the articles were more amateur",* says Cilakov.

In terms of personal protection, the practice of wearing a mask and disinfecting has become everyday routine.

*"I did not think of going anywhere in the field without a mask; we constantly used disinfectant and made sure to have as few contacts as possible indoors, and sometimes even the statements were made by phone. All reporters know the feeling that we want to look professional on TV, but in this time of storm, the working manner was completely changed, as the most important were the citizens and prompt and accurate information, all in order to save someone's life. The most difficult period for me was during the early parliamentary elections, when I had to report from all towns in the Vardar region. Although I wore protective mask, I still feared that I might get COVID 19. I will single out another event. In November, the number of patients in the town was growing, and the number of hospitalized was around 90, that was the period we all feared. I am very glad that the citizens ask me what my opinion is on this topic, but since I am not an expert, I left it to the authorities. However, I at once calm them down and told them that we all hope it will end as soon as possible", she added.*

Tamara Grncharoska, a journalist at Telma TV, says that the level of safety and protection of journalists in newsrooms during the pandemic can be easily compared to trying not to get water in your mouth while taking a shower. Simply put, no matter how hard you try, you cannot be one hundred percent sure that you have succeeded.

*"Therefore, after a year of working during pandemic, I can conclude that at the newsrooms or at least the newsroom where I work, measures are applied to protect journalists and media workers. Through daily disinfection of offices, division of labour into groups, strict observance of wearing a mask, providing disinfectants and masks. However the very nature of the journalists work, especially at television, creates the gaps through which 'water enters' i.e., the necessary going out in the field and to events, as well as the process of working in the newsrooms, where we are directed to communication and work with more people," explains Grncharoska.*

However, if the media saw the risk posed by the pandemic to their functioning as a result of which they took measures to protect journalists in the newsrooms, her feeling is that the protection institutions approached with double standard, more for their own, than for the protection of journalists.

*„On one hand, due to the pandemic, in 90 percent was abolished the holding of indoor press conferences with the presence of journalists, even where there are conditions for it, as well as the recording of indoor events. Live briefings and contacts have been kept to minimum, and access to institutions has been limited. At the same time, the holding and giving of statements and press conferences to officials in the open continues on daily basis, where journalists and camera operator often do not have adequate working conditions and cannot properly maintain distance and literally*

*breathe in each other's face, in attempt to record the statement or ask question. In such conditions, the journalists, and the camera operators with the mask on their faces and the disinfectant in their pockets hope that none of those around them has a COVID. However, the pandemic, in addition to working conditions, has changed the journalists' work, especially on television. Divided them into groups and mixed their sectors. Forcibly pushed them into the world of new communication technologies. It replaced their camera and microphone with Zoom and Skype, coffee-chats with telephone conversations and taught them to use programs to record live events on computer. It made them come to terms with the fact that online press conferences depend on the internet connection and the administrator's 'mute' button. Instead of free camera, they now often look for free terms for recording on computer, and improved their improvisational skills, especially when institutions will send them 20-second inserts from an event for two-minute article via WeTransfer. However, as it brought restrictions, obstacles, anxieties and suffering from 'childhood diseases' from the new manner of journalism functioning and newsrooms, the pandemic simultaneously strengthened the cooperation and solidarity among journalists in overcoming them, which for me is perhaps the only bright moment in the year of COVID journalism," says Grncharoska.*

The government, meanwhile, has drawn up detailed protocol for holding events with media presence in the

wake of coronavirus-caused pandemic. It contains two parts, general guidelines, which refer to all public events, on which the organizer envisages media presence, and a special part, which refers to events organized by government institutions, i.e., the presence of government representatives. According to this protocol, it is recommended to hold events outdoor if the weather and space conditions allow, for the ones that media presence is planned. By following the measures that all present must wear protective masks; sound system with sound shafts is provided; to avoid downloading sound from media workers' microphones; in order to protect the audience from grouping two separate microphones are provided, one placed in front of the speaker, while the other is for media workers asking questions; the microphones are disinfected before and after at the event, i.e., when the speaker changes. Disinfection is performed by cleaning with a cloth and isopropyl alcohol. The greatest possible distance (at least two meters) is provided between the attendees and at the same time between the journalists and the camera operators, but also at the same time between the journalists, the camera operators and the speakers the space is arranged in a manner that there is no grouping and the appropriate distance is kept.

If weather and space conditions do not allow outdoor media events, the government has recommended that they be held via digital live streaming tools, where the organizer is required to conduct technical inspection half hour before the event to provide functional connection for media workers. At the press conferences organized in

the Government, by the Minister of Health Venko Filipche, on several occasions the journalists complained that they could not ask more than one question and that channel for two-way communication was not provided because immediately after the answered question they were not able to ask additional question. The pandemic press conferences lasted long, at least an hour, sometimes even two hours, when more than one official was present, which made it challenge to summarize the main points and direct the public's attention to the main points.

The director of "Sloboden Pechat", Miroslav Jovanovikj says that with the first announcements and directions given by the Ministry of Health, regarding COVID 19, "Sloboden Pechat", defended the truth and prompt and accurate information for the benefit of the citizens.

*"Sloboden Pechat' as source of information has always used credible sources from government entities, WHO and other reference bodies from foreign countries, while daily struggling with false news and misinformation of all kinds. In the first days of the COVID pandemic, the company continued to perform its socially responsible function for informing the citizens and reorganized its operations by taking into account the health of its employees guided by the recommendations of the Ministry of Health, the Commission for Infectious Diseases and WHO. With the application of modern IT technologies, most of the employees in "Sloboden Pechat" were enabled to work equally efficiently and responsibly from home, avoiding physical*

*contact with colleagues in the premises of the 'Sloboden Pechat'. As one of the guardians of public good and health in our country, 'Sloboden Pechat' denied many false news, semi-information, demystified various conspiracy theories in the past period, and thus helped the citizens to restore faith in the health system in the country. 'Sloboden Pechat' has asked and will continue to ask questions that are unpleasant for the authorities, in order for His Majesty, the citizen finally to take the central place in our society. In fact, our slogan 'on the side of the people' should be proven and confirmed every day by the public in our country," says Jovanovikj.*

There were isolated cases during the pandemic, when journalists were prevented from doing their job in the public space around the "September 8" hospital. Therefore, representatives of AJM, SSNM and CEMM met with the Minister of Health, Venko Filipche, who confirmed that there is no formal decision that can limit the public space, where journalists work in front of public health facilities. He added that they can and should record smoothly in all public spaces in front of hospitals in order to provide professional information regarding the pandemic. The trade unions, on the other hand, pointed out that journalists should conduct their reporting in accordance with ethical standards, respecting the privacy of patients and their loved ones, in accordance with the public interest.

## 2.2. FINANCIAL TURMOIL FOR JOURNALISTS AND THE MEDIA

Since March, professional associations began urging the government to find mechanisms and manner to help journalists and the media to get through the crisis without profound consequences. There was an elevated risk that media workers and journalists would be fired, leading to question the level of credible and objective reporting, necessary in conditions of increased dissemination of misinformation and semi-information, which appeared in the media space. On one hand media functioned by facing the challenge of financial danger, and on the other hand, by facing enormous responsibility for properly informing the public.

In July last year, the Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers conducted survey among colleagues, which showed that journalists and media workers are afraid of the coronavirus, but also that they will lose their jobs. The survey was conducted among 150 respondents. 62 percent indicated that the new manner of working affects their mental health, 17 percent had their salary reduced, their owners did not provide protective equipment for 22 percent, and 45 percent needed additional protective equipment at the time of the survey or for the future, and 48 percent needed psychological support. For the 25 percent of journalists surveyed, the biggest problem with reporting COVID 19 was the reduced transparency of the institutions. Media workers are not immune to the corona virus is con-

firmed by the fact that only until July 1 last year, two deaths were registered among media workers as result of COVID 19. Four-year-old Bekim Bajramovski from Labunishta, employed as technician at Spectra TV and 51-year-old Shenol Ahmeti from MTV.

*“Dozens of journalists and media workers became positive on COVID-19, and some were sent to self-isolation due to contact with patients while performing their duties. During that period, by violation of workers’ rights, the owners voluntarily decided not to pay sick leave to 37 of our respondents, or 24 percent of respondents. One hundred respondents said they were paid for their sick leave,”* the Union concluded in the survey.

The fact is worrying, as many as 30 percent of those surveyed said they knew someone who lost their job during the corona pandemic. Seventeen percent of media workers said their wage had been reduced.

The Union and AJM strongly condemned the decision to dismiss five journalists, some of them fixed-term employees, and some of them did not had their part-time contracts extended, fearing and warning of the domino effect that could be created in other newsrooms.

*"The government has agreed to issue decree with legal force, which will cover journalists' health and social security contributions, provided their salaries are not reduced and their basic salary is returned. It is assumed that because of that there were not many complaints about dismissals, although the decree was for the period of three months, says Darko Duridanski from the journalists' Union."*

What was adopted as measure to mitigate the consequences of the crisis and maintain dignified level of functioning

of the media? During the pandemic, the media could use measures to mitigate the economic consequences, to pay net salary of 14.500 denars. At the proposal of the Agency for Electronic Communications, a decree was adopted which exempted the radios from the costs of using radio frequencies to the AEK.

Televisions licensed to broadcast via digital terrestrial multiplex have been exempted from the digitalisation fee for 2020, and the state has committed to pay for it. Compulsory social security contributions were also subsidized for media workers reporting on COVID 19.

## 2.3. THE MYTHS OF COVID 19 FURTHER CAUSED PROBLEMS FOR THE NEWSPAPERS

The regional media, at the beginning of the pandemic, in March, started reporting on trend of unjustified and panicked behaviour of readers who stopped or rarely started buying newspapers because they were afraid that they might be infected with the corona virus through the surface of the newspaper. Thus, the "Anatolia" news agency reported that in Ankara, the number of newspapers sold in early March dropped, because people did not leave home at first and adhered to quarantine, and be-

cause they thought, they could be infected with corona virus through the newspaper.

The risk of infected person transmitting the infection to commercial goods is low and the risk of contracting the coronavirus virus through object that has been moved, transported, exposed to different temperatures and weather conditions is also low, the World Health Organization said.

According to "Anatolia", readers have switched mostly to online platforms, and long-time loyal readers, who otherwise did not miss to buy two newspapers a day, in Turkey have given up this habit and pleasure because they were misinformed about how the corona virus is spreading.

The British service "BBC", in June last year, reported on the challenges that journalists who write on sports pages had

to face. Namely, with the cancellation of almost all sports competitions in this period, the problem arose as to how to fill the pages when the sports agenda was minimized.

Instead of sports games that were infrequent and not on the focus of reporting, the focus shifted to feature stories about the social care of individuals in the pandemic and sympathy for those who lost family members.

## 2.4. WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM THE PANDEMIC?

As the institutions of the system slowly began to return to normal and function with more or less undiminished intensity, as sessions began in the Assembly, sessions in the municipal councils and in other bodies of local self-government, as well as in the agencies in the country, so the agenda of journalists and media workers began to normalize. It is no longer only the corona virus that is being reported, but also the stories that are related to the everyday problems of the citizens, information from the state bodies that are not only related to the pandemic, but also to other social phenomena.

There is no doubt that the coronavirus and pandemic still cause sense of risk of infection among journalists, who continue to practice safeguards, and in those newsrooms where possible, work from home, with the help of technology and without the physical presence of the whole editorial office in the premises of the media. Internet gathering tools, as well as social networks, remain secure platform for communicating with sources in anticipation of the official end of the pandemic, when newsrooms can resume their normal functioning as before it happens.

**Cilakov:** Although we had a huge fear in us, we still tried to hide it

Pamela Cilakov, a journalist correspondent from Veles for MRTV 1, says that, in addition to health workers, police and journalists were the first to be struck by the COVID 19 pan-

demic, which swept the world and became hot topic for almost a year of our everyday life.

*"In addition to correspondence for the national service, for me as young journalist, more precisely a political analyst in the field of economics, to report on the topic of health was huge challenge. Both, doctors and scientists did not know exactly what it was. Moreover, we have huge burden to convey all this, consciously and responsibly before the public, to inform the citizens and, at the end, to calm them down, to remain conscientious and to appeal for the new*

*way of life, although we carried a huge fear in us, but still we tried to hide it. My city Veles, which I know as one of the busiest, during the curfew, only my camera operator and I were on the streets, touring the city, because we had live link call in the central daily for MRTV and that is the sight that I will never forget. My city was so empty and heartless. Depression, panic, fear and great anxiety reigned among every person."*

**Ilievski:** They adopted measures, but they did not always respect them

Trajche Ilievski, a camera operator from MTV, giving retrospective of the pandemic, which started in March 2020, says that at the beginning, the measures were respected. However, on several occasions, the camera operators had to react to non-compliance with the protocols of events organized by institutions.

*"The distance at the important events when more camera operators come to cover it, was not respected. We reacted through AJM and they corrected themselves. During elec-*

*tions for example, some political parties invited us to film in small rooms. We came to situation where a bad image was created as they thought we were boycotting them, and we were actually just protecting our loved ones and ourselves. In September or October, when the Assembly began its work, the Assembly itself began to disregard the measures. They made statements in the press centre, in the hall, instead of downstairs at the open area. After our reaction, they started coming downstairs again".*

**Grncharoska:** Online press conferences depend on the internet connection and the administrator "mute" button

*"However, if the media saw the risk posed by the pandemic to their functioning as a result of which they took measures to protect journalists in the newsrooms, her feeling is that the protection institutions approached with double standard, more for their own, than for the protection of journal-*

*ists, says the journalist from Telma TV, Tamara Grncharoska. However, the pandemic, in addition to working conditions, has changed the journalists' work, especially on television. Divided them into groups and mixed their sectors. Forci-*

bly pushed them into the world of new communication technologies. It replaced their camera and microphone with Zoom and Skype, coffee-chats with telephone conversations and taught them to use programs to record live events on computer. It made them come to terms with the fact that online press conferences depend on the internet connection and the administrator's 'mute' button. Instead of free camera, they now often look for free terms for recording on computer, and improved their improvi-

sational skills, especially when institutions will send them 20-second inserts from an event for two-minute article via WeTransfer. However, as it brought restrictions, obstacles, anxieties and suffering from "childhood diseases" from the new manner of journalism functioning and newsrooms, the pandemic simultaneously strengthened the cooperation and solidarity among journalists in overcoming them, which for me is perhaps the only bright moment in the year of COVID journalism", says Grncharoska

## 2.5. RECOMMENDATIONS: VACCINATION AGAINST COVID AND AGAINST MISINFORMATION?

Just over a year ago, the main ethical dilemma of journalists was related to the disclosure of information for the basic strain of the coronavirus, attempts to protect infected people from stigmatization, how the disease is transmitted and the like. Today, for all these questions, some of them are still with no clear answers, but the dilemmas of today's context are much more concerned with another aspect of the virus - the immunization. Coronavirus vaccines and all related issues are the main topics of research, analysis, and debate today. There are number of aspects considered in this topic i.e., the production and procurement of vaccines, their success and

side effects, conspiracy theories and stories on big profits that are done to the detriment of citizens. Naturally, all topics are legitimate. However, it should be also noted that in the information war that follows the topic of vaccination, the only thing that should not be compromised is the truth. Therefore, we will remind you on some of the guidelines for safe and professional reporting on corona virus prepared by the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) and the Council for Media Ethics of Macedonia (CEMM), in the interest of better-informed public and safer journalists and media workers during performance of their daily professional duties:

## GUIDELINES FOR PROFESSIONAL REPORTING

- ▶ Good check of information
- ▶ Continuity in informing
- ▶ Calming and offering solution
- ▶ Use of appropriate sources of information
- ▶ Use of appropriate titles
- ▶ Use of simple explanations
- ▶ Use the right vocabulary without sensationalism
- ▶ Framing the stories in the right context
- ▶ Careful use of visualization
- ▶ Active role in detecting misinformation

Although today the topic is little different from year ago still, these few universal rules are good guide for both

COVID-19 reporting and vaccination, as this year will be crucial in the fight against the dangerous virus.



Association of Journalists of Macedonia